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# The Early Marx on Needs

Andrew Chitty

Following the first widespread dissemination of Marx's early writings, his treatment of human needs was often taken as the basis for a critique of the 'false needs' created by capitalism and its consumer culture.<sup>1</sup> 'True needs' for meaningful social interaction were counterposed to the 'false needs' for ever more consumer goods.<sup>2</sup> Along with this went a tendency to construe the very idea of natural needs, needs given by our physiological nature, as an artifact of capitalist social relations.<sup>3</sup>

As the post-war boom has given way to a succession of major recessions in the advanced capitalist countries over the last twenty years, and the absolute impoverishment of parts of the Third World, the critique of consumerism has come to look increasingly irrelevant. Correspondingly more recent work on Marx's conception of human needs has tended to emphasise their basis in our natural physiology. This enables the degree to which they are satisfied to provide a simple but solid standard against which to condemn capitalism for its periodic reduction of masses of the world's population to poverty.<sup>4</sup> Ted Benton (1988) has recently attempted to use such a 'naturalistic' conception of human needs, in which the distance between human and animal needs is reduced and animals' needs are also given normative weight, to argue for an ecological content to Marx's thought.<sup>5</sup>

Both lines of interpretation, then, look to Marx for a conception of our 'true needs', although in the one case the implicit model of human need is something like the need for friendship, while in the other it is more like the need for cooked food. In this paper I will argue that Marx does have a concept of truly human needs. I will side with the first line of interpretation and against the second in seeing these needs as qualitatively distinct both from animal needs, and from needs as they are experienced by humans under capitalism. However, by contrast with the first line, I shall argue that Marx does not see the needs experienced by humans under capitalism as 'perverted' or 'distorted' versions of truly human needs. Rather, capitalism, or at least commodity production, is the means whereby truly human needs are *constituted*, albeit in an estranged form which can only be overcome through the abolition of both capitalism and commodity production.

Marx's concept of need has to be understood in the context of his philosophical anthropology, that is, his general theory of man.<sup>6</sup> As a first approximation, for Marx man's essence is *constituted* by his needs. So he says in the *Notes*

on James Mill (1844) that: '... the need for a thing is the most obvious, irrefutable proof that that thing is part of my essence' (NJM 267, MEW 452).<sup>7</sup>

It was in the *Notes on James Mill* (1844), the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) and *The German Ideology* (with Engels, 1845-6), that Marx worked out his philosophical anthropology.<sup>8</sup> Hence this paper will concentrate on the role that needs play in the anthropology of these texts. This leaves open the question of whether in his mature economic works Marx operated with substantially the same anthropology and the same concept of need. In fact I believe that he did, but at all events it seems safe to say that an understanding of the anthropology of the 1840s cannot fail to throw light on his concept of need in his later economic work.

Marx's way of developing his philosophical anthropology is first of all to derive the most essential characteristics of man, or the human being, by contrasting man to the animals. Then he tries to show that in man as we know him these characteristics are only realised in a self-stultifying way. This enables him in turn to contrast man as we know him with man as he could be, if those characteristics were realised properly. As a result, he can portray man's present condition as 'inhuman' without resorting to an entirely arbitrary conception of what counts as human.

## Human activity as species activity

What then distinguishes man from the animals? Marx's most fundamental answer is his *universality*. In the terminology of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, man is *Gattungswesen*, that is, a 'species-being'. *Gattung* means species, but also type or kind, so we could equally translate *Gattungswesen* as a 'type-being' or a 'kind-being'.<sup>9</sup> *Wesen* means 'essence', but also 'a being' (as opposed to the generic term 'being' meaning 'existence'). From now on I shall translate it as 'essence' for consistency, but we have to remember that for Marx it means not only an essence but also a being, a creature who has an essence.

Marx expounds the idea of man as a species-essence with a threefold definition:

Man is a species-essence, not only because (1) he practically and theoretically makes the kind [*Gattung*] – both his own and those of other things – his object, but also – and this is simply another way of saying the

same thing – because (2) he relates to himself<sup>10</sup> as the present [*gegenwärtigen*], living species, because (3) he relates to himself as a *universal* and therefore free essence. (EPM 327, MEW 515).

I shall concentrate on the practical rather than the theoretical side of this preliminary definition, that is, on what Marx elsewhere calls species-activity, or kind-activity.<sup>11</sup> Species-activity means the activity characteristic of a species-essence.<sup>12</sup> I shall take the three parts of the definition of species-activity in the following order, different from Marx's, so as to show how they are connected to one another: (1) he relates to himself as the species, (2) he relates to himself as a free essence, as a free being, (3) he makes the kind his object.

(1) Species-activity is first of all 'relating to oneself as the species', that is, I take it, participating in the life of the species as a whole by producing something for other human beings and in turn enjoying what others have produced for you:

The *interchange*<sup>13</sup> both of human activities in the course of production and of *human products* with each other is equal to the species-activity and the species-spirit whose real, conscious and true existence consists in *social* activity and *social* enjoyment. (NJM 265, MEW 450-51)

(2) So, for Marx, 'human' and 'social' are virtually equivalent terms. But mutual production and consumption are not all that he means by species-activity, otherwise it could be said that ants engage in species-activity, or that ants have a society, and Marx would deny this. What is unique about human species-activity, for Marx, seems to be that the activities of production are *directed*, that is, men not only act on nature, but they act on their own actions.

The animal is immediately one with its life-activity. It does not distinguish itself from it; it *is* that activity. Man makes his life-activity itself into an object of his willing and consciousness. He has conscious life-activity. It is not a determination with which he immediately merges. Conscious life-activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life-activity. Only because of that is he a species-essence.... Only because of that is his activity free activity. (EPM 328, MEW 516)<sup>14</sup>

So species-activity is firstly the activity of producing things for other human beings and enjoying the products of other human beings, and secondly it is activity which is consciously directed, and thus free. Marx never really clarifies the link between these two aspects of the idea of species activity, but it seems to be that, in the case of humans, as opposed to ants, individuals are not assigned by their own nature to any one particular productive activity. Therefore on the one hand they must be capable of a whole range of alternative productive activities, yet on the other they must have some say of singling out one of those activities as the one to engage in, at any one time, in order to coordinate with other individuals. The way they do this is by language, and language brings in its train consciousness and the conscious

direction of activities. Here is how Marx and Engels sketch the connection in *The German Ideology*:

Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical, real, consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me; language, like consciousness, first arises from the need, the necessity [*Notdurft*], of intercourse with other men. (CW5 44, MEW2 30)

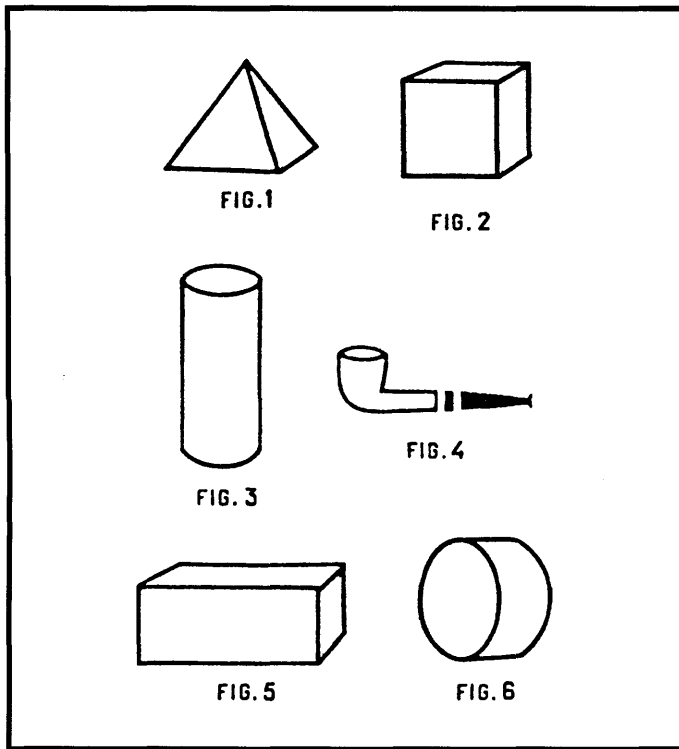
(3) Now consciously directed activity can be called universal in the sense that once human beings are capable of redirecting their activity they can in principle redirect it over and over again. But it also involves a universality *within* each of those activities. The conscious direction of activities has to be their direction in accord with general or 'universal' concepts. So it must be activity which has general concepts, as it were 'built into it'. Specifically, this must mean that when human beings act on things they do not act on them as unique particulars, but *as examples* of the kinds (or species) to which those things belong. Their action on a thing is 'mediated' through the general concept of which they are treating the thing as an instance. I suggest that this is what Marx means by the third aspect of his definition of species-activity, the idea that it is activity which makes the species, or kind, its object. If I burn a log for warmth I am treating it as an instance of firewood. My action on the log is mediated through the concept of 'firewood', and the object of my activity is the log *as* a piece of firewood. If instead I sit on it I am treating it as 'a stool'. If I throw it away I am treating it as 'rubbish', and so on. In this sense species-activity is activity which takes 'universal objects'.<sup>15</sup>

To summarise, the unifying characteristic of species-activity is what can loosely be called its 'universal' quality. This quality recurs in each of the three parts of the definition. Species-activity is universal (1) in that it is social, (2) in that it is consciously directed and so free, and (3) in that it is mediated by general concepts.

### Human property as essential objects

For Marx, the essence of man consists in the first instance in his characteristic activity, namely species-activity. From this starting point, it is possible to see how the essence of man could also consist in his characteristic *needs*. An activity is defined partly by its objects, by what it is activity *on*: the objects which it uses, consumes, or produces. It is also defined by its motivation, by what it is activity *for*. So, just as we can talk of the 'essential activities' of a being, those activities which are definitive of its essence, we also can talk of its 'essential objects' (the objects of those activities) and also of its 'essential motivations' (the motivating sources of those activities). I think it is this idea of essential human motivations that Marx tried to convey with the term 'needs'.<sup>16</sup>

Need, essential activity and essential object, in other words, must be understood to form a single complex for Marx. Need is the subjective component of activity, just as the object is its objective component. This suggests that, just as human activity is distinguished from animal activity by its universality, and its objects by their universality, so



human *needs* should be distinguished from animal needs by their universality.

To see what the idea of universal needs involves, we have to say something more about what Marx means by man's essential objects, the objects of species-activity. I said that an activity treats a thing as a 'universal object' in that it treats it as an example of a kind, as when I use a log as a stool. Here the universality is purely 'intentional': a matter of what I treat the thing as, or use it for. Characteristically, though, human beings impose this universality on the *physical structure* of the things which are the objects of their activity. For example, we construct a chair. Now the universality which we 'impose' on the log by sitting on it has been *built into* the chair. A chair embodies in its structure a certain class of individual actions which count as 'using this thing as a chair', in that it is designed to facilitate that class of actions. It is the physical analogue of a concept.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, this built-in universality is a general characteristic of the things which human beings produce for each other. The structure of a chair means that in principle any human being, *any* being capable of making the kind its object, can use it.

So man's essential objects are universal both in the sense that they embody the universality of a class of standard 'use actions' in their physical structure, and in the sense that they can be used in principle by any human being.

Now according to Marx through working on nature to create a world of such universal objects, through, as it were 'humanising nature', man progressively 'objectifies' his inherent universality, that is, 'objectifies' himself as a species-essence:

It is therefore in his working-up of the objective world that man really proves himself to be a *species-essence*. This production is his active species-life.

Through it nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labour is therefore the *objectification of the species-life of man*: for man doubles [*verdoppelt*] himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and therefore looks at himself in a world he has created. (EPM 329, MEW 517)<sup>18</sup>

Such objects are what Marx calls 'human property', 'true property', or 'inner property', terms which have a positive not a negative meaning for him. Human property is the objectification of our species-essence in the physical world. It is the objects used, produced, and consumed by species-activity. It is, as he puts it: '... the *existence [Dasein]* of *essential objects* for man, both as objects of enjoyment and of activity' (EPM 375, MEW 563).

Thus human property comprises the products of human species-activity which can fulfil human needs. Human property and human needs are correlative terms, and both are equally definitive of the human essence. This is made clearest in the passage from which I quoted at the start, which contrasts this 'inner property' with ordinary private property. It describes two private property owners each of whom experiences a need for the other's object:

The longing for each of these objects, i.e. the need for them, shows each private-property-owner [*Privateigentümer*], makes him conscious, that he has another *essential* relation to the objects apart from that of private property, that he is not the particular essence which he takes himself to be but a *total* essence, whose needs stand in a relation of *inner* property to all products, including those of another's labour. For the need for a thing is the most obvious, irrefutable proof that thing is part of *my* essence, that its being is for me and that its *property [Eigentum]* is my property, the peculiarity [*Eigentümlichkeit*] of my essence. (NJM 267, MEW 452)<sup>19</sup>

### Human needs as essential motivations

Their connection with human property gives us a first handle on what Marx means by human needs. If we now look at what Marx has to say about them directly, we can see him again concentrating on the characteristic of universality. Sometimes Marx expresses this by contrasting the mobility of human needs with the physical, immediate, or fixed quality of animal needs:

It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwellings, like the bee, the beaver, the ant etc. But they produce only what they or their young immediately need [*bedarf*]; they produce one-sidedly, while man produces universally; they produce only under the domination of immediate physical need, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom from such need. (EPM 329, MEW 517)

In so far as man is characteristically human, his activity is motivated by needs which are not simply given by his

physical constitution. They are not 'immediate'. Instead they are mediated by species-activity itself and the world of objects it produces. In the course of history, the social interchange of productive activities and products becomes more complex, and human needs *develop* along with the new objects which are produced. Marx calls this the 'education of the senses':

Not only the five senses, but also the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, the *human* sense, the humanity of the senses – all these come into being only through the existence [*Dasein*] of *their* objects, through *humanised* nature. The *education* [*Bildung*] of the five senses is the work of all previous world history. *Sense* which is trapped by crude practical need has only a *restricted* sense. For a man who is starving the human form of food does not exist, only its abstract existence [*Dasein*] as food does. (EPM 353, MEW 541-2)

Obviously Marx is not saying here that the mere production of a new object gives rise to a need for it. His picture must be of needs, activities and objects developing in close interaction with each other, and it does not commit him to any one of them providing the motor of development. His point is their interdependence. It is easy to see that the objects we produce depend on the needs we experience. Marx is arguing that the dependence goes the other way as well: whether we can experience a need depends on whether the objects that correspond to that need have become available to us.<sup>20</sup>

The result of this whole process is that needs tend to become refined. They become less like the hungry man's need for food and more like the musically cultivated person's need for music.<sup>21</sup> At the same time needs tend to diversify and multiply. Mann's needs become 'many-sided' along with the diversification of production (NJM 268, MEW 454), and this results in what Marx calls 'the rich man and rich human need' (EPM 356, MEW 544):

*Developed* society produces man in all the wealth of his essence, the *rich* man who is *profoundly and abundantly endowed with all the senses* as its constant reality. (EPM 354, MEW 542)

Insofar as needs become refined on the one hand and many-sided on the other, they become in effect needs which can only be satisfied by the products of other human beings, by the objectifications of species-activity. In this sense human needs are more and more needs for other human beings. Marx connects the idea that human needs are our needs for each other with a conception of human need as *expressive*. He says that:

The *rich* man is simultaneously the man in-need-of [*Bedürftige*] a totality of human life-expression; he is the man in whom his own realisation exists as inner necessity, as *necessity* [*Not*]. (EMP 356, MEW 544)

Human beings express themselves through the creation of universal objects, and so the need for human life-expression is the need to create such objects for other human beings, i.e. to create objects that can in principle satisfy the needs of any

human being, thus to satisfy other people's needs as such, regardless of who those people are. The individual does not become a universal altruist, but experiences the creation of a universal object, one which can in principle satisfy the needs of any human being, as a need in itself. An inventor or a scientist could serve just as much for a present-day example of expressive need as an artist. More generally, Marx suggests that a point could be reached at which all labour results from such an 'inner necessary must [*Not*]' (NJM 278, MEW 263).<sup>22</sup>

For Marx, then, human needs are constitutive of our essence as human beings. This contrasts with a tradition of thought that runs from Plato and the Stoics up to Kant and Nietzsche in which needs were antithetical to our essence as free beings, and the multiplication of needs associated with civilisation meant only the multiplication of ways in which man's will was controlled and unfree. In Kant, motivation by needs and inclinations is heteronomy, and the free will determines itself in abstraction from all such motivations. For Marx instead the refinement and diversification of needs is of the essence of man. Accordingly his freedom *consists* in this elaboration. It is only social conditions that make us experience things otherwise.

Marx and Engels make this clearest in a discussion of the categorical imperative in the *German Ideology*:

The only reason why Christianity wanted to free us from the domination of the flesh and 'desires [*Begierden*]' as a driving force' was because we regarded our flesh and our desires as something foreign to us; it wanted to free us from natural determination only because it regarded our own nature as not belonging to us. For if I myself am not nature, if my natural desires, my whole natural character, do not belong to myself – and this is the doctrine of Christianity – then all determination by nature – whether through my own natural-character [*Natürlichkeit*] or through so-called external nature – appears to me as a determination by something alien, a fetter, a compulsion used against me, *heteronomy as opposed to autonomy of the spirit*. (CW5 254, MEW2 237)<sup>23</sup>

The reason that we experience our needs and desires as an external imposition on us is that social conditions, 'worldly relations', are such as to frustrate them, to 'fix' them, as Marx and Engels put it (CW5 255, MEW2 237). By contrast, communists 'strive to achieve an organisation of production and intercourse which will make possible the normal satisfaction of all needs, i.e. a satisfaction which is limited only by the needs themselves' (CW5 256, MEW2 239).<sup>24</sup>

### Conditional exchange and labour for an income

This brings us to the question of what it is about present 'worldly relations' that prevents this normal satisfaction, and makes us experience our needs as external to our essence and opposed to our freedom. In fact everything I have said so far on species-activity, human property and human needs is only half of the story for Marx, to the point that I have been forced to draw partly on his descriptions of

## Private property and domination by the object

a future socialist society in order to elaborate it. The central point he attempts to make in the *1844 Manuscripts* is that all these three aspects of the human essence have come into existence in a way which is self-contradictory, in an 'estranged' or 'alienated' way. This is because they have come into existence through what Marx calls 'exchange' (*Tausch*) or 'barter' (*Tauschhandel*). The point about 'exchange', as opposed to the general concept of 'interchange' (*Austausch*), which I used in introducing species-activity, is that it is *conditional*. It is the exchange of products between two parties in which each gives his product to the other only on condition that the other does likewise.<sup>25</sup>

Conditional exchange is the way that species-activity comes into existence, principally because it allows the interchange of products to take place outside the narrow range of the family or the primitive tribal community. What you can exchange with one person, you can in principle exchange with anyone else, so that exchange can ultimately establish an interchange of products between the whole of the human race. But just this capability of establishing an interchange with strangers while continuing to treat them as strangers, as alien, is what makes conditional exchange, and the form of species-activity it introduces, self-contradictory.

Marx expresses this by describing a transition from an apparently solitary 'man for himself – in a stage of savage barbarism' (NJM 274, MEW 459), producing purely for his own needs, to man producing for conditional exchange.<sup>26</sup> When he produces for his own needs his labour is not species-activity any more than that of a beaver is. No universality is involved. The object produced by his labour is at the same time the object which he uses. When he begins to produce for exchange, his activity becomes, potentially at least, species-activity. But although it is species-activity in that it is the production of objects which will satisfy the needs of other human beings, this is not the producer's primary *purpose* in engaging in it. His primary purpose is still to satisfy his *own* needs, only now indirectly through exchanging his products for the products of other people. If he adopts the purpose of producing objects which will satisfy their needs, this is only a derivative purpose, an aim which he adopts because he must attain it in order to attain his primary aim. Since for Marx an activity is partly defined by its purpose, he expresses this by saying that the producer's activity has changed its character. Whereas before it was simply labour for subsistence now it has become 'labour-for-an-income':

When the relation of exchange [*Tausches*] is presupposed, labour immediately becomes *labour-for-an-income* [*Erwerbsarbeit*]<sup>27</sup> ... Labour [that is, labour before exchange – AC] was indeed the immediate *source of subsistence* but at the same time the activation of his *individual existence*. Through exchange, his labour became in part a *source of income*. Its purpose and mode-of-existence have become different. [EPM 268, MEW 454]

'Labour-for-an-income', then, is contradictory in that its objective character as species-activity is at odds with the subjective purpose of the person doing it.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the producer's activity now has a different character, so does the object he produces. Previously it was produced simply as an individual means of subsistence. It was not human property at all in Marx's sense. Now it is produced for other human beings, so it is human property. Yet from the point of view of the producer it is produced simply as a means of exchange. Previously the producer produced in isolation from other individuals – they did not appear on the scene at all. Now he produces for them, but since he produces his product as a means of exchange he must also produce it as something *actively withheld* from them. If my exchange is conditional I must withhold my product from you until you agree to give me yours in return, and you have to do likewise. Marx expresses this by saying that the object is now produced as 'private property'. It is private property in that it is human property which is at the same time *privatus*, excluded from the use of the other.<sup>29</sup> Thus private property as object is the counterpart of labour-for-an-income as activity (along with its ancillary activity, the activity of exchanging). It has the same contradictory or estranged character as that activity:

Exchange or barter is the social species-act, the community, social intercourse and integration of man within *private* property, and for that reason it is the external, alienated species-act. It appears as *barter* just because of this. (NJM 267, MEW 453)

Furthermore, when the product is produced and exchanged as private property, the conditionality inherent in exchange gives it, in a certain sense, a *power* over its-own producer. This is because by A's making his act of giving B his product conditional on B's doing the same, A uses his product as a means to gain control over B's activity. On the other hand B is doing just the same thing to A. This means in turn that A's attitude is not whimsical or malicious: it is *only* by both offering to give B his product and threatening to withhold it, that A can get B's product from him. Unless A has something which B needs to offer in exchange for B's product, A's need does not constitute an 'effective demand' for that product, as economists have put it since Adam Smith. So A must use his product as a means by which to exert power over B, thanks to its capacity to satisfy B's needs. B is in the same position with respect to A.

The thing that gives your need for my possessions a *value*, a *worth*, and an *effect* in my eyes is simply and solely your *possession*, the *equivalent* of my possession. Our reciprocal product, therefore, is the *means*, the *mediator*, the *instrument*, the *acknowledged power* of our mutual needs over each other. (EPM 276, MEW 461)

Since each party uses his own product as a means of exerting power over the other, each is in turn reduced to a means for the other to produce what he needs. Each is forced by the other to produce his own product, in the sense that unless he does so he cannot satisfy his *own* need for the other's product. The instrumentality inherent in conditional ex-

change makes instruments of the exchangers as well as of their products. The last stage in this argument is that, because I use my product as a power over you, forcing you to produce your own product, your *own product* in turn becomes a power over you. That is, you find yourself in a position where, in order to satisfy your need for my products, you *must* produce your own product.

In your eyes your product is an *instrument*, a *means* whereby to master my product and hence to satisfy your needs. But in my eyes it is the *purpose* of our exchange. It is you who serve as the means, the instrument, in the production of this object which is my goal, just as conversely you stand in the same relation to my object. But (1) each of us really *does behave* in the way the other regards him. You have really turned yourself into the means, the instrument, the producer of *your own object* so as to master mine. (2) Your own object is merely the *sensuous husk*, the *hidden form* of my object. For its production *signifies*, seeks to express, the acquisition [*Erwerb*] of my object. Thus you have really become a *means*, an instrument of your object even for yourself... (JM 277, MEW 462)

or, in summary form:

The *means* is the *true power* over an object and hence we each regard our own products as the *power* each has over the other and over himself, i.e. our own product has stood up on its hind legs against us: it had seemed to be our property, but in reality we are its property. (NJM 276, MEW 461)

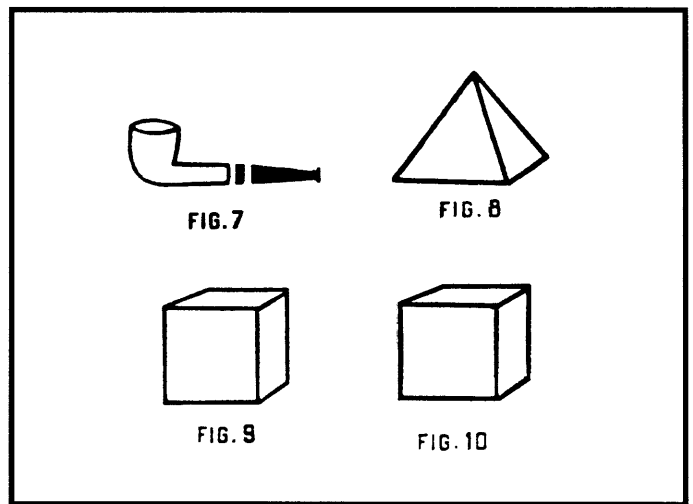
This domination by the object becomes much more incapable once we have not just two people exchanging but a complete social division of labour based on conditional exchange. Then each individual only produces one thing and has to satisfy *all* his needs by exchanging that product:

The more production becomes many-sided, i.e. the more needs become many-sided, the more the activity of the producer becomes one-sided, the more completely labour falls into the category of labour-for-an-income until, finally, no other meaning is left to it. (NJM 268-9, MEW 454)

So another way of putting this domination of the producer by his object would be to say that he is dominated by his position in the social division of labour. This is how Marx and Engels put it in the *German Ideology* (CW5 47, MEW2 34).

### The social constitution of domination by the object

It might be argued against Marx that the exchangers are only 'compelled by their product' in the sense in which a human being is when he is in the 'savage state' producing entirely for his own (animal) needs. After all he too is in a situation where he can only satisfy his needs by producing his products. So he too finds his needs compelling him through the intermediary of the product, in the sense that he must



produce the product if he is to satisfy them. Why should the fact that the 'conditional chain', that begins with his needs and ends with his compulsion to produce, passes via the product and the need of the *other* person make things different?

Marx's answer might have been that the satisfaction of a being's intrinsic needs does not constitute a compulsion on that being. On the contrary, it is that being's essential activity. To say that beavers are 'compelled' to build dams by their need for fish supposes that there is something else they would rather be doing, that they have some other inner urges which are more essential to their nature than dam-building. The separation between means and ends which makes it possible for the means to appear as compelled by the ends simply does not exist for the animal, or for man 'in the savage state', producing for himself. In order for means to separate out from, and stand in opposition to, ends, the two have to be incarnated in objects which I take different attitudes, and it is just this separation which conditional exchange achieves.

If I produce something for my own needs, there is no clear line between production and consumption. Suppose I am living directly off the fruits of nature and I have to peel a fruit before eating it, does the peeling constitute an act of production of 'peeled fruit' or is it part of the consumption of the fruit? Is gathering fruit, or hunting for game, a separate act of production or an initial phase of consumption? On the other hand, when I satisfy my needs indirectly through conditional exchange with others, production and consumption are clearly defined by their different objects. Production is what I do to the object I am going to exchange, consumption is what I do to the object I get in return. Conditional exchange also makes my productive activity 'instrumental' in a quite new way, for the object which I produce no longer has any inherent connection with my needs. It is connected to them only insofar as others are willing to give me something in exchange for it which will satisfy my needs, thus only via the wills of other people. With the development of exchange:

It becomes wholly contingent and inessential whether the relationship between producer and product is one of immediate enjoyment and personal needs, and whether the *activity*, the act of working, involves the



fulfilment of his personality, the realisation of his natural talents and spiritual goals. (NJM 269, MEW 454)

So my production of my product becomes completely separate from my satisfaction of my need.

When in addition the means to the satisfaction of a need is in the possession of another consciousness who is deliberately using it to force me to act in accord with his will rather than mine, then I can come to experience producing my own product in order to gain that means as a 'compulsion'.<sup>30</sup>

To put it another way, it is only because the other person uses my activity as an instrumental way to produce the object which he needs, that I come to use my *own* activity in an instrumental way too. As Marx says, 'each of us really *does behave* as the other regards him.'

So the compulsion with respect to his own object which each party experiences in the exchange relationship is not simply the consequence of a compulsive quality of his own needs which is transmitted through a chain of necessary conditions for the satisfaction of those needs, a chain ending with his production of the object. Rather, the compulsion is constituted *in the relationship of conditional exchange itself*. The inherent externality of a conditional exchange relationship is reproduced in an 'externality' in the way in which each exchanger relates to his own product, and to his own activity.

### Egoistic need as alienated need

This self-external quality of productive activity is what Marx refers to when he calls productive activity within the relations of private property 'estranged' or 'alienated' labour. As Marx describes it:

... to the labourer the maintenance of his individual existence appears as the *aim* of his activity; his actual doings count only as a means to this end. He thus activates his life to acquire the means of *life*. (NJM 269, MEW 454)

Rather than say more on alienated labour, though I want to concentrate on what conditional exchange means for the way in which human need comes into existence for Marx. One way he puts this is that human needs come into existence as *egoistic* or *self-interested* need. This is need which is actively *counterposed* to the needs of others. While animal need is not even conscious of the needs of others and properly human need is the need to satisfy the needs of others, here the individual is conscious of the needs of others, but only as something alien to his own. Egoistic need is the counterpart of alienated labour and private property. It is human need as it is experienced within an exchange economy, within 'civil society'.

Egoistic need develops alongside the social division of labour mediated by conditional exchange, in other words alongside the increasing transformation of activity into labour-for-an-income. Labour-for-an-income means:

the determination of the labourer by social needs which are alien to him and a compulsion on him, to

which he submits from egoistic need, from necessity [*Not*]; for him they mean only a source of satisfaction of his pressing-need [*Notdurft*] while for them he is only the slave that satisfies their needs.... Thus the greater, the more developed the power of society within the private property relation, the more man is *egoistic*, unsocial and estranged from his own essence. (NJM 269, MEW 454)

The association of egoistic need with 'necessity' in the last quote connects egoistic need with the idea of compulsion by one's own object. The exchange relation results in each person experiencing the production of their own object as a kind of compulsion. His need for the object which he produces is a 'compulsive need'. It is a need which he himself experiences as impinging on him externally. We could describe such needs as 'estranged' or 'alienated' in the same way that Marx describes labour-for-an-income as estranged labour.<sup>31</sup>

Since my need for my own product is not based on my direct use of it but on my ability to exchange it for others, this compulsion also takes the form of needing to *have* the product, to hold it exclusively. The 'fundamental presupposition of private property' is that man 'only produces in order to *have*' (NJM 274, MEW 459).<sup>32</sup> Exclusive possession is the absolute prerequisite of conditional exchange. Once barter has developed into exchange mediated by money, my compulsive need for my product becomes subordinate to my compulsive need for the money for which I can sell it, so that Marx can say that 'The need for money is ... the true need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates' (EPM 358, MEW 547).

When Marx extends his analysis from production for exchange to capitalism, he develops two forms of this need for money. Capitalism is essentially conceived as production for exchange in which one section of society (the capitalists) come to personify money and its power, while the rest (the workers) personify labour-for-an-income or estranged labour. Correspondingly, egoistic need in the capitalist becomes the need to accumulate money as such, while in the worker it becomes reduced to the need for enough money just to maintain himself as a worker. Yet despite this asymmetry, both conceptions of need are simply developments of the basic idea of egoistic need as constituted in simple exchange: the need for your own object, made compulsive through your relation to another with whom you hope to exchange it.

### Conclusion

To conclude, when Marx talks of 'worldly relations' being responsible for the fixing of our needs as an alien power over us, I suggest that it is the exchange relation that he has principally in mind. For Marx, human need is constituted in exchange society in a self-contradictory or estranged form, just as species-activity and its objects, human property, are. On the one hand, human need is the need for the products of other human beings; on the other it takes the form of a need counterposed to the needs of others. On the one hand it is need which through its universality expresses the freedom



intrinsic to species-activity; on the other it takes the form of a compulsive need which is opposed to freedom. On the one hand, it is the need for interchange with other human beings; on the other it takes the form of the need to possess an inanimate thing.

By extension, Marx's positive conception of needs in 'truly human society' or socialism does not amount to a list of what will or will not count as needs for human beings in such a society. It is simply the idea that in such a society needs will no longer have the contradictory form that they necessarily take in a society based on private property and conditional exchange – the kind of society in which alone they can be constituted and developed.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Michael Inwood, Mike Martin, Danny Goldstick and the editors of *Radical Philosophy* for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I have used the following abbreviations: NJM = *Notes on James Mill* (in *Early Writings*, ed. Colletti), EPM = *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (in *Early Writings*, ed. Colletti), CW = *Marx and Engels: Collected Works* (with volume number), MEW = *Marx-Engels Werke* (with volume number; if no number is given, the *Erganzesband*). I have modified the translations cited on a number of occasions. All emphases in quotes are Marx's.
- 2 I have in mind, for example, the writings of Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse.
- 3 See, for example, Heller 1974, pp. 31-3.
- 4 For example, Geras 1983, pp. 104-6.
- 5 See especially pp. 255-7.
- 6 Marx's term *Bedürfnis* is generally translated as a 'need' in English editions of his works, occasionally as a 'want' or a 'requirement'. There is only one other term which he uses which is sometimes translated as 'need'. This is *Not* (meaning necessity, exigency, distress). Marx only uses this very occasionally. What I want to look at here is Marx's use of *Bedürfnis* and of the terms closely related to it (*bedürfen*, *bedürftig*, *Bedürftigkeit*). When I talk about 'Marx's concept of need' I mean strictly the concept that Marx expressed by *Bedürfnis* and these related terms. I translate Marx's *Mensch* and *menschlich* in the traditional way as 'man' and 'human', and use the pronouns 'he' and 'his' with them. Although the German *Mensch* is more gender-neutral, this translation seems to reflect Marx's intentions more closely than adopting deliberately gender-neutral formulations.
- 7 McLellan 1969, pp. 107-11, points out that Feuerbach is probably the source of Marx's idea that the essence of a thing is given by its objects. For example in *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1834) Feuerbach says that: 'What a being [*Wesen*] is, however, is recognised, only through its object; the object to which a being necessarily relates is nothing but its own revealed essence [*Wesen*]' (7, Vogel p. 9, Schmidt p. 40). Cf. Hegel's definition of essence as 'relation to itself only by being relation to another' (*Encyclopaedia Logic* §112, Garaets et al., p. 175, Suhrkamp, vol. 8, p. 112). Marx's difference here is that he relates man's essence specifically to the objects of his *needs*.
- 8 I shall refer to the first two texts collectively as the *1844 Manuscripts*.
- 9 In his 1843 *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* Marx occasionally contrasted *Gattung* with *Art* as genus to species (e.g. *Early Writings* 88, MEW1 231), but he does not seem to intend such a contrast in the 1844 writings.
- 10 *Sich zu sich selbst verhält*: an alternative translation would be 'treats himself' or 'behaves towards himself'.
- 11 Here I only follow Marx, who says elsewhere that the whole character of a species 'is contained in the character of its life-activity' (EPM 328, MEW 516).

- 12 Thus the term 'species-activity' does not mean the activity characteristic of any species, but specifically the activity characteristic of the *human* species, of that species whose characteristic activity incorporates the species in its intentional content; of that species which is a species 'for itself'.
- 13 *Der Austausch*. Marx evidently does not mean to limit this to the conditional exchange of private property, introduced below.
- 14 Cf. EPM 328, MEW 516: 'free conscious activity is the species-character of man.'
- 15 Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right* suggests that when I use a thing to satisfy a need I cease to recognise its particularity and relate to it in a universal way. 'The thing is reduced to a means of satisfying my need' (§59A), and so to an instance of the class of things which could satisfy that need. There seems to be a difficulty here: if a bird eats a worm (rather than a stick), does it treat the worm as food and so 'make the kind its object'? Perhaps Marx would have said that to treat it as food in the sense intended here it must have a concept of food, and so must be conscious.
- 16 Thus I shall claim that Marx does not use 'needs' in the way standard in modern English, to mean requirements for survival or for well-being, although of course human needs in Marx's sense are generally also, as a matter of fact, such requirements. Marx's term comes from the language of psychology and political economy, as, for example, taken up by Hegel into the *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Spirit*, §431-5, 471-3 and the *Philosophy of Right* §189-95, rather than from the language of moral argument.
- 17 Cf. Hegel's descriptions of the tool in the *System of Ethical Life* as the 'persistent rule of labour' (Harris and Knox p. 113, Lasson p. 428) and as a 'corporeal sign' (Harris and Knox p. 115, Lasson p. 431).
- 18 Cf. EPM 352, MEW 541: 'when objective actuality becomes everywhere for man in society the actuality of man's essential powers ... all *objects* become for him the *objectification* of himself, become objects which confirm and actualise his individuality, become *his* objects.'
- 19 Regrettably the *Early Writings* translation omits the crucial phrase 'inner property' (cf. CW3 218). The contrast between inner and outer property is also cast between 'true property' and exclusory property (NJM 276, MEW 461), or else between 'truly human and social property' and private property (EPM 333, MEW 521), or between 'the meaning of private property' and the estranged form in which it exists (EPM 375, MEW 563; cf. the reference to the 'essence of private property' at EPM 261, MEW 446). Marx's conception of inner property as the objectification of species-activity derives from Hegel's theory of property as the objectification of the free will in the *Philosophy of Right* (e.g. §41). The contrast between outer and inner property is a descendant of Hegel's opposition between possession ('external power over something') and property ('that I, as free will, am an object to myself in what I possess and only become an actual will by this means', §45). While possession is particular, property is rational and so implicitly universal (§49). However, while Hegel generally associates the satisfaction of needs with possession and particularity (§41A, 45, 49, 59), Marx, in a Feuerbachian inversion, identifies needs with his 'true' property. Elsewhere I hope to show that the contrast between inner and outer property is the seed of Marx's later opposition between productive forces and relations of production.
- 20 In the 1857 introduction Marx does not seem to go further than this, asserting that, although products and needs presuppose each other, 'production is the real point of departure and hence also the predominant moment' (*Grundrisse*, p. 94).
- 21 The implication is that art-objects are the most developed example of 'universal objects'. Marx seems to be drawing on Kant's aesthetics, in which beauty consists in the formal (hence universal) qualities of an object, and in which the appreciation of such objects does not mean their individual consumption, so that they are available for others too.

- 22 This is the same idea as he later expresses in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* by saying that in the higher phase of communism labour becomes 'life's prime need' (*Selected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 19, MEW19 21).
- 23 Geras (1983, p. 62) sees Marx as operating with a 'physiologically given' concept of human nature here, but the passage is also consistent with the view I have derived from the 1844 writings, in which the human essence appears in the progressive universalisation and social mediation of needs which may be initially simply physiologically based urges.
- 24 This last passage was admittedly crossed out in the text.
- 25 Marx implicitly contrasts *Tausch* (exchange) and *Tauschhandel* (barter) to *wechselseitiger Austausch* (mutual interchange) in NJM 269, MEW 455. But his usage is not entirely stable, since on NJM 266, MEW 451 and again on NJM 274, MEW 459 he uses *Austausch* where he evidently means conditional exchange. It might be said that any kind of interchange of products must be conditional in some sense. Marx's response might have been that when my production for others becomes in itself a need for me, then it becomes conditional on others producing for me only in the minimal sense that unless they do I will not survive, or at least not as a person motivated by such a need. As long as I remain such a person, however, I will be motivated to produce for others without 'making conditions', in the way that a composer who 'lives for work' does.
- 26 If this is a historical transition it suggests an original state of nature in which human beings produce for themselves in isolation from each other. This would contradict Marx's usual view that 'the more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole' (*Grundrisse*, p. 84). In his later works Marx thinks of conditional exchange as starting on the borders of such early societies.
- 27 Alternative translations might be 'labour-for-a-living' or 'labour-for-gain'. In this passage Marx immediately qualifies labour-for-an-income as 'estranged' (*entfremdete*). As I shall suggest below, it becomes the estranged or 'alienated' (*entäusserte*) labour of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. The distinction between labour and labour-for-an-income foreshadows that between concrete labour and abstract labour in Marx's mature works. It corresponds to that between 'labour' and 'industry' in Sir James Steuart, for whom industry is 'the application to ingenious labour in a free man, in order to procure, by means of trade, an equivalent' (*Inquiry*, p. 33, cf. p. 37). Marx acknowledges Steuart's 'industry' as the sources for his own 'abstract labour' in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 58.
- 28 Similarly in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel says that a form of knowledge is contradictory in that its conception of its object is at odds with its conception of the subjective act of cognition of the object (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 52-4).
- 29 See the analysis of the contrast between human and private property in note 19 above.
- 30 Subsequently individuals might transfer the same sense of compulsion to those areas of life in which they continue to produce for themselves (cooking for example). My reconstruction of Marx here is obviously inspired by Hegel's dialectic of mastery and servitude (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*), in which the servant's relationship to the object he produces is transformed by his relationship of subordination to the master (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 117-19). On my reading, Marx represents the relationship between conditional exchangers in the *Notes on James Mill* as a kind of mutual master and servant relationship, in which each threatens the other (though not with violent death, as in Hegel, but with refusal to satisfy a need). Marx himself concludes his account of domination by the object with an apparent reference to Hegel's master-servant relation: 'If our mutual servitude (*Knechtschaft*) to the object appears at the beginning of the development in actuality as the relation of mastery and slavery [*Herrschaft und Sklaverei*], that is only the crude and frank expression of our essential relationship' (NJM 277, MEW 462).
- 31 I owe the formulation 'alienated needs' to Heller 1974, ch. 2.
- 32 Cf. EPM 352, MEW 540: 'all the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple estrangement of all these senses – the sense of *having*.'

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